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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 FREETOWN 000106

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR AF/W (JHUNTER/ESPRUILL)

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [SL](#)

SUBJECT: MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS CONVENES DIP CORPS,
FACES CRITICISM

REF: A. FREETOWN 99

[1](#)B. FREETOWN 104

Classified By: Ambassador June Carter Perry for reasons 1.4 (b/d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Foreign Minister Zainab Bangura met with the Diplomatic Corps and donors on March 17 to present the government's response to the violent events on March 13 and 16 (reftel A). Bangura reported that the government believes the situation is unacceptable, given the progress the country has made since the war ended, and said that President Koroma would be calling on all citizens to work towards restoring calm. Bangura made assurances that the government is investigating the incidents, and will punish anyone involved in instigating violence, including the Sierra Leone Police (SLP). However, she was clear in her belief that the SLPP, whom she said have a long-standing and well-earned reputation for violence and hooliganism, are to blame. Her apparent lack of concern over the severity of the violence and her failure to accept that members of the APC party could somehow be involved demonstrated that party politics are very much at-play, even within the highest echelons of government. President Koroma will need to act strongly and expeditiously to convince Sierra Leoneans that he stands above party politics, can exert whatever discipline is needed to maintain peace and security, and will not tolerate further, similar incidents, no matter which party perpetuates them. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) Despite her strong words that those guilty, regardless of party affiliation, would be punished, Bangura offered an indictment of the SLPP for historic issues. For example, she reiterated the comments made by President Koroma to the UN Executive Representative of the Secretary General that current SLPP leadership played a heavy hand in orchestrating the 1992 coup (reftel B). Bangura stated her opinion that such people have a right to participate in party politics, but should not be given positions of authority or leadership, since past actions demonstrate that they cannot handle them responsibly. She said that the SLPP initiated the events on March 13 and 16, not APC members, and that they are intentionally promoting instability in an attempt to halt the progress and development being achieved under the APC government.

[1](#)3. (C) Bangura also commented on the severity of the violence being reported. Some members of the Dip Corps, for example, found her comments on the rape allegations to be dismissive. Her statements that rapes in broad daylight occur "in the bush," and that Freetown is "not the bush" are particularly troubling. Despite her own apparent skepticism, Bangura said that the SLP will investigate all claims of assault, and that they will publish their findings over the next several weeks.

[1](#)4. (C) The Foreign Minister supported the decision to close the party radio stations for the time being, to prevent them from spreading rumors and inciting further violence. She said that the radio stations were initially accepted in order to

provide a voice to all opposition parties, but that they have abused their privileges by flaunting journalistic integrity. She claimed that the SLPP radio station made false statements, such as reporting that President Koroma was dead; such statements, she said, have a negative impact on peace and security. Though Bangura clearly blames the SLPP for initiating the violence, she did acknowledge that the government's machinery, such as the SLP, failed to respond promptly or effectively. Responding to criticism of the SLP from the Dip Corps, including members from several African nations, and addressing capacity-related questions, Bangura said that the SLP should have been more prepared for these incidents, and that they need to work towards anticipating similar problems.

15. (C) Beyond questions related to the SLP, the Dip Corps also commented on the issues of youth unemployment and overcrowding in Freetown. Bangura highlighted the APC government's promotion of the Sierra Leone Youth Commission, and several upcoming agricultural projects that will hopefully draw people out of the city and into rural areas. She also championed President Koroma's agenda, which includes not only agriculture, but also the energy sector and infrastructure investment.

16. (C) Comment: Bangura's response to the incidents are hardly surprising, as they primarily echo sentiments expressed by the President on March 17 in a private meeting with the UN and then via a national statement that night. Condemning the violence and promising a neutral investigation are reasonable and important steps, but the government's refusal to accept any APC culpability while also engaging in

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negative political rhetoric could add fuel to the fire at the same time as they're claiming to want to extinguish it. Given that the incidents are driven by partisanship, it will be hard to convince either party to place their political rivalry aside; however, if the President is as committed to national unity as he appears to be, he should set an example for both sides, accept some responsibility for the incidents, and ensure that the investigations are convincingly neutral. Whether or not he can discipline his party to follow in this figurative laying down of arms, though, will remain to be seen. End Comment.
PERRY